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Hilton M. Power

November 1970

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ABSTRACT

This review examines the major evidence as to the extent and effectiveness of public affairs education provided by, or in conjunction with, the mass media. It assembles relevant findings on participation patterns and trends, participant characteristics, educational television and other study methods, the broadcast media, newspapers, and books as information sources, and the role of communications media in attitude change and innovation. A table and 56 references also appear.

MASS MEDIA IN PUBLIC AFFAIRS ADULT EDUCATION

HILTON M. POWER

This review examines the major evidence about the extent and effectiveness of public affairs education provided by or in conjunction with the mass media. It brings together relevant findings about participation, sources of public affairs information habitually used by adults and cites examples of the planned use of the media to enhance public affairs adult education.

The invention of print and its widespread use provided the impetus for adult education as it is now understood.(1:330) A desire to read and understand the Bible is no longer an important motive in this country for the acquisition of literacy. Research about the impact and use of radio and television, because of their inherent potential has overshadowed inquiries into the use of books and other print media.

In all modern societies, whatever the political philosophy and structure, forms of public affairs education exist based upon the belief that some degree of understanding about the nature of public issues and consent about their appropriate resolution or treatment is essential for the maintenance of a stable government. There has been an unresolved question in this society over how to stimulate interest in public affairs. (2:)

Some argue citizenship carries a responsibility to be informed and interested in the affairs of the nation and placing the common good above self interest. Another viewpoint suggests the democratic process is a system of interest group representation, and considers self-interest an entirely appropriate basis for participation in public affairs. Adult education operates upon the assumption that people can and should be educated to maintain an interest in public affairs regardless of personal rewards. The problem appears to be how to find the optimum interest in public affairs beyween the extremes of total commitment and total indifference.

Participation

In 1957 the Bureau of the Census conducted a sample survey of adult education participation and found a fraction more than a million adults enrolled in formal programs of civic and public affairs education. (3) The participants accounted for thirteen percent of all persons enrolled in adult education. Soon after, Hero published the results of his extensive analysis of the literature dealing with Americans in world affairs. He concluded there was less than one percent of the adult population who met his criteria of interest, information, realistic analysis, and action; (4:105) that opinion leaders, who were both effective communicators and who were relatively well informed, were a small minority. (5:43) Johnstone and Rivera conducted a

National Opinion Research Center study of adult education participation in 1961-62. The study found a measure of participation in public affairs education and noted about public affairs education that:

> on the basis of popular notions about adult education one might have expected considerably more in this field.... These results point up markedly the pragmatic quality of adult education in the United States. (6:52)

By 1962 the absolute numbers of participants in public affairs had increased by no more than thirty-seven thousand, to a total of 1,080,000. Woock has suggested that, because of the problems of definition in any study, the numbers could be increased somewhat by persons enumerated in other categories of study. (7:64) Despite a steady overall expansion of interest in adult education, the Johnstone study reveals a sharp decline in the proportion of participation in public affairs when compared with the study by the Bureau of the Census. Public affairs participation as a proportion of all adult students dropped from thirteen per cent to 5.2 per cent.

One might have imagined this relative drop in interest revealed by these studies would have been compensated for by a wider use of the media, especially in a subject area like public affairs. On the contrary, according to Johnstone's sample of 23,950 respondents only fifty-nine were found to have followed a course of study on educational television. (8:54) The best estimate of regular viewers of educational television (people who viewed once a week, or more) was 5.4% of the adult population, or approximately 6,200,000 adults. Estimates of occasional viewers (less than once a week) were about double, or 10.7 per cent, some 12,200,000 adults. (9:229) These estimates are substantially the same as those reached by Schramm, Lyle and Pool. (10:57) Johnstone and Rivera concluded:

> the result of this survey would indicate that television as a form of adult instruction does not represent a very significant force...It is surprising that a medium capable of attracting the largest audiences ever known should attract so few followers in its educational effort. (11:50)

For all that, television as a method of study was used more frequently by students of public affairs (6 per cent) than all other categories of subject matter, except personal development, which also claimed the same proportion. (12:56)

Characteristics of Participants

The Johnstone study shows that more men than women are involved in public affairs education, that two-thirds are over thirty-five years of age, and more than half have had some college education. (13:80) There are a number of studies of participation in world affairs education but all based upon much smaller samples. Hattery, Rogers and Stuhler (14:1-4) Hattery (15:12-13) and Baumanannd Wahner (16) all support the general trend of the Johnstone findings. They differ in matters of age and education. Educational level usually tends to be higher than in the national sample. All studies

are unanimous about the high social status enjoyed by participants in any form of public affairs education, when measured by income, educational level and occupation.

Method of Study

Adult preferences for the methods of study recorded by Johnstone (17:56) show that: educational television was highly favored by students of public affairs (6 per cent); talks and lectures accounted for thirty per cent, which was three times more than in any other subject; and discussion groups enrolled sixteen per cent (this method was exceeded only by religious studies). Attending classes, self education and correspondence were each rated lower than for any other subjects studied.

Sources of Information

Because of the very small number of adults who do participate in public affairs education, it is to be expected that the average citizen, though surrounded by mass media, is not well informed. Patchem (18) Withey (19), Houle and Nelson (20) indicate that a quarter of the population has only vague information about current events. Hero (21:9-10) argues that the number with minimal information is nearer half the adult population because of the tendency of polls to overestimate interest. The level and amount of information retained by adults is affected by trust and confidence in the source and an individual's previous frame of reference into which new information must fit, says Robinson (22:3). Festinger (23) has shown the tendency for people to rationalize, distort, forge and invent in order to maintain an environment that is understandable. Robinson also states it is important for individuals in authenticating the truth and interpretation of events to turn to others who are trusted and considered knowledgeable. (24:4)

During presidential campaigns television regularly reaches all population groups fairly equally. Newspapers and magazines, especially the latter, are more likely to be used regualrly by better educated groups, whites, and readers in the higher income and occupational categories than by others. About seventy per cent of American adults make regular use of television for information on campaigns, candidates and issues; about twenty-five per cent make regular use of magazines according to a study by Wade and Schramm (25:198). The same authors corroborate findings by others about the greater importance of television as a source of information for people with little education, females, non-whites, farm and blue collar workers than for others; whereas the print media are more likely to be the more predominant source for the highly educated groups, whites, males, professional, managerial, white collar workers, and high income groups than for the others. (26:201)

Robinson (27:38-39) in a study of sources of information about world affairs found that contrary to the results of election studies where seventy-five per cent cited media sources as more informative, more than half his respondents gave personal contacts as their most important source.

In a matched sample of activists and random respondents Robinson found the most active talked with fifty per cent more people than the random group; activists had a greater propensity for and frequency of discussion about world affairs with employers, members of their political party, members of their religious faith and with others known to have a special interest in foreign affairs. Of those claiming mass media sources, activists were much more reliant on magazines and newspapers, while newspapers were listed as the major source (and magazines the least important) among respondents classified as non-activists in his random sample. He concluded:

> We think the evidence definitely points to the crucial importance of face to face communication and printed media in spreading and interpreting foreign affairs information. (28:39)

There is a seeming contradiction to these findings in a study by Parker and Paisley (29) which found that print or television sources were used more than inter-personal sources for information on national affairs by a factor of more than ten-to-one. This discrepancy may be due to the fact that the proportion of activists, influentials, or opinion leaders represents less than ten per cent of the population.

A paper by Robinson and Converse (30) estimates that on an average day a person with some college education, as compared to someone who has not completed high school,has a chance of being exposed to the various media in this order:

	Person with Some College Education.	Person with less than High School
Serious newspaper reading	74% chance	49% chance
Listening to news on radio	64	52
Watching a television news program	44	44
Reading a magazine with serious content	19	6
Reading a serious book	7	1

For the amount of serious reading of books, it is difficult to find a more useful estimate than the one derived from Robinson and Converse. (31) Janowitz (32:219) observes that reading books in this country, given the level of income and education, appears to be lower than in other countries such as England and Sweden. Rogers and Stuhler found that persons who were known to be especially interested in world affairs and who were active in organizations, reported they were voracious readers of high quality printed media. (33) Serious reading is almost certain to increase as a result of the paperback explosion or revolution.

Information, Communication and Attitude Change.

Studies of the impact of communications upon attitude change show that

increased information increases attention and interest in international affairs but does not necessarily produce internationalist attitudes, according to Cherrington (34) and Pool, Keller and Bauer.(35:161-175)

A growing body of empirical research into the effects of specific influence attempts indicate that the mass media can produce changes in the areas of knowledge, attitudes, and values but these tend to be temporary unless reinforced; and the strength of impact is greatly affected by factors such as the status and credibility of the communicator, the quality of the communication, the predisposition of the audience, and the degree of participation of the audience. Hovland, Janis, and Kelly provide and excellent model of attitude change in an educational setting. (36)

There are a number of studies dealing with adoptions of innovations among farmers by Beal and Bohlen (37), Lionberger (38), Rogers (39) and Verner (40), and in the medical profession by Katz (41:20:70:82), which are suggestive for public affairs education. Innovators-early adopters and those who follow in their footsteps or don't--may be categorized in terms of measurable or definable social, economic or cultural attributes such as status, community activity, education, formal and informal contacts, age, and economic status. Verner (42:71-74) shows the degree to which changes, or the adoption of new practices, occur as the result of the use of formal learning situations, printed material and specially designed television programs. In all these studies personal influence plays a crucial role in producing action. And action seldom stems from the media alone.

Present Practices

Many current practices and programs owe their origins to experiments underwritten by the Fund for Adult Education. The Fund helped establish educational television, provided grants to support a series of new initiatives in public affairs education including support of Johnson's early work at San Bernadino, culminating in the Metroplex program at St. Louis (43) and aid for the initial stages of the Great Decisions program.

Because the Great Decisions program has been in existence for more than fifteen years, it has attracted considerable attention and had its methods, participants and outcomes evaluated by a number of researchers including Wanderer (44), Hattery (45), Baumann and Wahner (46), and Blum and Fitzpatrick (47).

In urban affairs, Miller's (48) consideration of the program, "Metropolis, Creator or Destroyer?" and Power's (49) account of a community consultation program designed to help formulate workable and acceptable guidelines and priorities for a new regional planning authority in California, both describe multi-media use in some detail. Starr (50) gives an account of a similar program design using group study materials, television broadcasts and viewing groups with feed-back to a studio panel, for a discussion of urban problems by a cross section of ethnic, racial, religious and income groups. The program succeeded in enlisting the participation and approbation of a number of poor and non-whites.

Johnson describes Boston's TV station WGBH and the Foreign Policy Association's first use of simulation or gaming as a means of involving viewing groups in an elaborate and realistic decision making process to settle an international conflict.(51:11)

These five examples of public affairs education involving the mass media do not necessarily represent the total spectrum but are meant to be suggestive of the range of current practice.

Conclusion

To obtain a broader perspective of the problems, achievements and prospects of the use of mass media in adult education reference should be made to Ohliger (52) , Johnson (53), Alter (54), and Grinager (55). Groombridge (56) also deserves careful reading because his three case studies from Canada, Czechoslovakia and Japan illustrate vividly how the national milieu influences the manner in which television is used for educational purposes.

In the compass of this report it is not possible to speculate about our present inadequacies, or treat even briefly realistic possibilities for innovative departures from present practices, although a careful reading of the sources cited here will provide abundant evidence on these matters.

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